DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 215 036 UD 022 185

AUTHOR Martin, Kristine L.
TITLE African and Pacific Literature: A Comparative Study.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Minority and Ethnic Studies (10th, Santa Clara, CA, April 14-17, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *African Literature; Colonialism; *Culture Conflict; Developing Nations; *Fiction; Foreign Countries; *Literature; Poetry; *Social Change
IDENTIFIERS *Africa; *Pacific Islands

ABSTRACT

Literary writing in Africa and the Pacific addresses themes that reflect colonial experience and the struggles of newly independent nations to cope with change and conflicts between traditional and modern existence. The novels of Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o of Kenya illustrate many dominant themes of African literature. Achebe writes of increasing alienation from traditional rural existence, the breakdown of traditional values, and problems that accompany change. Ngugi's primary themes concern alienation from the land and the economic forces associated with the struggle for independence. Both writers allude to African history and culture in their work. Similar themes run through the literature of the Pacific, an area which also experienced colonization. The poetry of John Kasaipwalova of Papua New Guidea and Konai Helu Thaman of Tonua express emotional reactions to a chanqed world, while the novels of Albert Wendt and Vincent Eri present characters torn between old and new worlds in New Zealand, Samoa, and Papua New Guinea. African and Pacific writings are reactions in part to a threat to a people's existence. The writers from these regions synthesize past and present, and unify the people through a common identity. (Author/MJL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED215036

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kristine L. Martin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

AFRICAN AND PACIFIC LITERATURE:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY*

By

Kristine L. Martin

* A paper for presentation at the Tenth Annual Conference on Minority and Ethnic Studies at University of Santa Clara, April 14-17, 1982.

UD 022-185

The new nations of Africa and the islands of the South Pacific have much in common, despite their ethnic and cultural diversity and the vast distance that separates them. The literature which has developed over the past thirty years in Africa and over the past ten in the Pacific mirrors their shared experiences and outlook. The authors from both regions have acted as spokespersons for their people, voicing concerns about their future as individuals as well as members of a politically viable ethnic community.

Both regions have attracted the attention of seekers of adventure and fortune. In quest of the exotic and the dangerous, western travellers flocked to Africa and the Pacific in an attempt not only to escape their own safe, predictable cultures, but also to find their own identities. The frequency with which the theme of the quest for identity appears in European travel and adventure fiction set in Africa or the Pacific leads one to suspect that the seeker is hopeful that his own identity, should he ever find it, will somehow be more interesting simply because he seeks it in bizarre surroundings.

The natives of these regions, when or if they appear in this type of novel, are invariably presented superficially. They provide background color primarily, and their strange, paganistic rituals are emphasized, as in James Michener's novels. They are merely a source of cheap curiosity. Herman Melville's semi-autobiographical novel, Typee, set in the Marquesas Islands, also illustrates this fascination with the exotic. The Marquesans, reputedly cannibals, who adopt the leading character are presented as simple, child-like creatures with inexplicable, violent tendencies. The Marquesans remain inexplicable because Melville perceives them through European, nineteenth-century eyes and fails to endow them with truly human qualities.

The same tendency is reflected in the actions of both the missionaries who went to Africa and the Pacific to reap a harvest of souls and the colonial masters who went to gather treasure and create empires in the name of a civilizing mission. This was the "white man's burden." The colonial experiences of these regions left the colonized people irrevocably altered. The writers of the newly independent nations, after one hundred or more years of colonization, are now voicing their bitterness, frustration, and longing as they attempt to redefine their identities.

The literary modes which have emerged from Africa and the Pacific fit well within the European tradition. The works selected for discussion here are all written in English and have as a major theme an exploration of individual or social consciousness. In general, each writer's purpose is to describe his society or to prescribe a particular mode of cultural behavior in order to strengthen beliefs, clarify issues and awaken a response in his intended audience. Chinua Achebe, perhaps Africa's most widely-read novelist, points to the need for African writers to express their social commitment in their work:

> ...African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity

> and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.[1]

The artist becomes a means of synthesizing two worlds: the past, disrupted by colonialism, and the present, with its inherent problems following independence. The novels of two African writers, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o of Kenya illustrate many of the dominant themes in African literature.

The characters in Achebe's four novels become increasingly alienated from a traditional rural existence and as they do so, misfortune and personal tragedy pursue them. Achebe's solution to the problem is not simplistic advocacy of a return to the village, for he knows that would be unrealistic. What he perceives modern, urban Africansrequire is a firm foundation--a knowledge of their past combined with an understanding of the present--in order to establish a new set of values appropriate to their changed existence. Achebe's novels illustrate the changes which have occurred in Nigeria since the late nineteenth century. Through Okonkwo, the hero of Things Fall Apart, we see the strength and vitality of a traditional village community prior to the coming of white missionaries and administrators. The close-knit Ibo village depends for survival on the unity of the group and the bond between the individual and the community. Okonkwo represents the values of his village; he is titled, strong, heroic in battle, and hard-working. He adheres strictly to the

[1] G. Killam, ed., African Writers on African Writing. London: Heinemann, 1973, p. 8

spiritual and ethical standards of his clan in the belief that his welfare is inextricably linked to that of the group.

Christianity and the changes to traditional religion, the judicial system, and personal values which accompany it undermine collective solidarity. With its emphasis on individual rather than group responsibility, Christianity encouraged conflict between the individual and the community. The attack on prevailing beliefs, law, and kinship ties undermines the unity of the village, and "things" actually do fall apart.

Achebe's three subsequent novels reveal his concern with the effects of the breakdown of traditional values. Two of these, set in urban Lagos, No Longer at East and A Man of the People, portray the radical changes Achebe perceives in recent Ibo society. The new, school-educated Africans have to redefine their values and thus their identity in order to survive. The security offered by traditional village life is no longer available and the individual faces the dilemma of being corrupted by the power acquired as one of the new elite in an independent nation. The old guidelines have vanished and in their place modern Africans must formulate a new set of values or be torn between two conflicting and irreconcilable lifestyles.

The novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o provide an interesting source for students of African literature and history. His first three novels, The River Between, Weep Not, Child and A Grain of Wheat trace developments in Kenya through the early stages of colonization to the struggle for national liberation and the anticipation of Independence. Ngugi is a committed Marxist and his primary themes are linked to the issues of land ownership,

alienation from the land, and the economic forces associated with the struggle for Independence.

Just as Achebe relies on Ibo proverbs to lend authenticity and color to his work, Ngugi draws heavily on Kenyan mythology with frequent references to a black prophet now labelled a "Moses" and "the prophesy." He thus attaches a mystic significance to the struggle of Kenyans to achieve liberation. Ngugi's first novel, The River Between,[2] concerns the influence of Christianity on a ridge tribe, and Ngugi, appropriately enough, introduces the savior symbol. Interwoven through the story are vital elements of Kenya mythology, vital particularly to Ngugi's commitment to the land issue. At the basis of this mythology is the belief that the creator Murungu had given the land to Gikuyu and Mumbi to pass on to their ancestors for eternity. In addition, it is prophesied that men dressed in clothes like butterflies (p. 2), carrying sticks that produced lethal fire, will later bring a huge iron snake, and most important, will want the ancestral lands for themselves. The only salvation, according to the prophesy, will come from the hills to lead and free the people.

This theme of salvation recurs in Ngugi's fiction. Possible saviors such as Kenyatta are arrested or hanged by the whitemen, rejected by their own people, or proven incapable of the task. From such a background Mau Mau emerges, claiming to understand the secrets and powers of the whiteman and offering salvation to the people by ousting the European and restoring the land to its rightful owners; by doing so, those having sworn allegiance to Mau Mau principles would fulfill the prophecy.

[2]Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, The River Between, London: 1965, Heinemann.

Ngugi envisages Kenyan society as being restructured through a reactionary revolution to revive social and cultural structures of the past as a reality of the future. Thus his envisaged revolution would not achieve anything new, but restore an "ideal" pre-colonial state which he assumes to have been characterized by peace, harmony, and goodness. Chinua Achebe's answer to the future does not lie in such a simplistic view. For him, one must confront the future; values constantly change and the individual must adapt to survive. It is Achebe's belief that by understanding one's past, selecting the appropriate values and adapting them to the present, the individual can survive.

To allow two writers to speak for many African nations is, of course, a gross over-simplification. These two, Achebe and Ngugi, were chosen from a much wider sample primarily because they show a diversity of views, their works are widely available, and they have both been the subject of considerable literary scholarship. Furthermore, their works reflect the enormous changes which have occurred during this century and focus on the individual African's response to the dilemma.

While the colonial experience was no more pleasant in the Pacific Islands than it was in Africa, there was little organized resistance or violence. In the Pacific region, islanders withdrew, intimidated by their technologically superior colonial masters. This passivity has become a central feature of the Island character, at least as depicted by romance novelists and certainly as promoted by the tourist industry. The lazy, placid, sun and kava-soaked islander, content to sit under a palm-tree or

in a fishing boat for little or no reward, is a stereotype that indigenous writers are understandably anxious to erase. The islanders they portray are troubled and lonely characters, alienated from their culture, now destroyed by colonialism, and uncomfortable with the new technological world. Like the newly-independent African counterpart some fifteen to twenty years previously, islanders have to redefine their values, lifestyle, and identity. It is no wonder then that the literature coming from Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Fiji reflects many of the themes already evident in African literature.

Papuan New Guinean John Kasaipwalova's poem, Reluctant Flame,[3] stands as a direct link between Africa and the Pacific, for in it Kasaipwalova sees their destinies intertwined. His vision is reminiscent of that of the Negritude poets of the 1930s, anxious to establish their differentness, their separateness from whites, and their cultural purity. The following quotation from Kasaipwalova's long poem illustrates the resentment he nurtures:

> Listen carefully, this is but one arm of the
> reluctant flame
> Burning and melting the icy bloodless body
> My flame take your fuel from these brother
> flames
> Let not the oceans drown your linking pipe
> You will grow, you will grow, you will grow
> like a boil on pale skins
> Maybe your vibrant lava will flow to burn
> anew the world
> When Johannesburg and New York is in flames
> and the black vomit will fertilize this barren
> soil
> But today your eyes are dimdimed and in your
> enemy you see your friend

[3]Ulli Beier, ed., Black Writing from New Guinea, St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: 1973, University of Queensland Press. p. 55-62.

My lover, my me, we will not follow the cold
pale reach for the moon
Our ancestors and our spirits sleep on this
earth
Let the lunatics meet on the lunacy, we will
use the soil to grow our brotherly flame
Our reluctant dream flame is burning disconnected
like a bush fire
But one day, one day... one day... (p. 59)

Reluctant Flame stands apart from much Pacific literature, unusual in its bitterness, its complexity of language and structure. More typical of the style as well as the sentiments expressed in Pacific poetry during the mid-seventies are these samples from Tongan poet, Konai Helu Thaman. The first of these poems, "I Tremble,"[4] reveals the poet's insecurity and bewilderment in her changed world.

I tremble
At the thought
Of going to town
And meeting brutal men
Who think that white is clean
And black is dirty;
Of politicians who lie
And make lots of half promises
And of ordinary people
Who believe them
Just because they wear ties. (p. 2)

The following extract from Thaman's "Elite"[5] illustrates the dilemma of the newly-educated islander, now a member of the elite:

In the dead of night
he remembers
His promises, his philosophies
The fun time he had
With the common people -
His type of people;
He was one of them then:
They drank and swore together;
Now he is a different person
He has a new face
More serious, more commanding
And pregnant with pomp.

[4]Konai Helu Thaman. You, the Choice of My Parents, Suva, Fiji: 1974, Mana Publications.

[5]Konai Helu Thaman, p. 9

But he is no better
Than the old man
With the torn shirt
Spitting his way home
From his garden
And swallowing the gas-smell
Dust on his way;
Or the fellers
Pushing sand-carts
Across the torn-up village road.

He hears his lost friends cry
"Come down to us, we need you."
He aches in the desire to
Identify with them again;
But it's too late
He cannot be himself again
And feels the ground
Which weeps for his dismemberment.

The most sustained expression of the bewilderment with which islanders see their altered status is in Albert Wendt's novel, Sons For the Return Home.[6] Set in both New Zealand and Samoa, Sons For the Return Home explores the growing consciousness of the young male character who is torn between loyalty to his Samoan parents and heritage and his love for a white New Zealand woman. As befits the complexity of the situation, Wendt guides us with subtle descriptive prose through the awakening of his character's sexuality and sense of identity. Wendt's character epitomizes the dilemma of the educated islander who is unable and unwilling to fully return home. He finds Samoan society radically different from that portrayed in his mother's stories, and he sees his relatives impressed only by material possessions rather than by strength of character. To escape this shallow materialism, he temporarily immerses himself in Samoan legends and stories about his grandfather. Fortified by this experience, he feels better able to cope with the task of creating a new life by fusing elements of both his traditional and modern existence.

[6]Albert Wendt, Sons For the Return Home, Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia: 1975, Longman Paul, Ltd.

One other published Pacific novel is The Crocodile by Papuan New Guinean Vincent Eri. The tone of this novel is far more pessimistic than that of Sons... and its style far less technically sophisticated. The Crocodile's theme, however, is similar, for it too deals with the bewilderment and final despair of a boy who is cheated, exploited, and humiliated by Australian soldiers and colonial administrators. Hoiri, the leading character of the novel, is unable to deal with the growing complexity of his life. His wife is reputedly taken by a crocodile, but it remains unclear whether the crocodile is real or a symbolic representation of sorcerers. Hoiri is torn between seeking revenge through counter-sorcery, in which he has decreasing faith because of his exposure to Christianity, or accepting her death as reality. Hoiri's experiences as an aide to Australian soldiers during World War II, culminating in his attack upon a woman who resembles his dead wife, reveal that he is lost between two cultures. He is rejected as unequal by the white men who have exploited him, but he is also unable to derive satisfaction from his old village ways. Contact with white society has made him ambitious but it has also withheld the means of fulfilling his dreams. His final hope, as he is led to jail, is that someday, through education, his son will come to understand those things which continue to baffle him.

While it has been necessary to focus on the most obvious thematic similarities between African and Pacific literature, other factors, such as the choice of English or French, as the means of communication, as well as fundamental stylistic similarities could also be explored. In addition, the writers of the Pacific and Africa face a somewhat uncertain literary future,

for unless their more talented writers explore fresh themes, much of the enthusiasm generated by their early work may wane. The literature which has emerged to date, however, is exciting and vital, reflecting the chaotic and bewildering changes accompanying the end of colonialism.

The major concerns of many African and Pacific writers are issues which determine their viability as members of an ethnic community. The question of identification with the land, both in the particular sense of an individual's right to property and in the general sense of a "homeland," lies at the heart of a number of African and Pacific novels and poems. Ngugi, for example, deals with the question of land rights extensively in A Grain of Wheat. Albert Wendt deals with the question of each from one's homeland in Sons For the Return Home. While the exile from Samoa has been voluntary, it has been an unhappy experience. The Samoa they left flowers in the parents' imaginations, and the sons hear tales of a land and people which assume heoric proportions. The reality of the Samoa they finally return to is not the "home" the hero anticipates, and at the end of the novel he leaves to continue the search. Although he is more confident in his knowledge of himself as an individual, in fact he is still an exile, unsure of his ethnicity.

In Achebe's work, the "homeland" symbol is the rural village where traditional values, though weakened, are still retained. Modern Africans, suggests Achebe, should not abandon their past, for a sense of history, of shared customs and experiences is necessary to help them establish themselves in a changed world. In his early novels, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God,

Achebe thus emphasizes the songs, proverbs and legends which were an important part of traditional Ibo life, thereby teaching his people about their past so that they may recapture a sense of continuity.

African and Pacific writing is a reaction in part to a threat upon a people's existence. The threats posed by sweeping technological changes are perceived to be as real as those posed by colonialism. Even though colonialism is a thing of the past for most Africans and many islanders, their lives have been so altered that it is difficult for them to think of themselves as part of a continuous heritage. While the writers from these regions reflect upon the bewildering experiences they and their people share, they are involved in the task of unifying their people. The writer's task, then, is at once personal and political, for the literature provides a focus, a means by which people can identify themselves as members of a group whose bonds transcend the maelstrom generated by the collision of traditional and technological forces.

African Literature

Achebe, Chinua. A Man of the People. London: Heinemann, 1975.

Achebe, Chinua. No Longer at Ease. New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1961.

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. London: Heinemann, 1975.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. A Grain of Wheat. London: Heinemann, 1967.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. The River Between. London: Heinemann, 1965.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Weep Not, Child. London: Heinemann, 1964.

Pacific Island Literature

Ulli Beier, ed. Black Writing From New Guinea. Brisbane, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1973.

Eri, Vincent. The Crocodile. Ringwood, Victoria, Australia: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973.

Thaman, Konai Helu. You, the Choice of my Parents. Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1974.

Wendt, Albert. Sons for the Return Home. Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia: Longman, Australia, Pty, Ltd., 1975.

Supplemental Reading List of Pacific Island Literature

Krauth, Nigel and Elton Brash, eds. Modern Poetry from New Guinea. Port Morseby, PNG: Papua Pocket Poets, 1972.

Malifa, Sano. Looking Down the Waves. Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1975.

Wendt, Albert, ed. Some Modern Poetry from Fiji. Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1974.

Wendt, Albert, ed. Some Modern Poetry from Western Samoa. Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1974.

Wendt, Albert, ed. Some Modern Poetry from the Solomon Islands. Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1975.

Wendt, Albert, ed. Leaves of the Banyon Tree. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: 1981, Penguin.

Wendt, Albert, ed. Some Modern Poetry from The New Hebrides. Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1975.

Wendt, Albert. Flying - Fox in a Freedom Tree. Hawthorn, Vic. Australia: Longman Australia Pty. Ltd., 1974 (Short Stories.)

Secondary Sources

Killam, G., ed. African Writers on African Writing. London: Heinemann, 1973.